THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
The Cross

John M. Buchanan
April 16, 2000

"Many will object that it is morbid to focus on someone's sufferings.... Yet the death of Jesus still draws children, women, and men to the love of the one, true, God and, holding them in that love, sustains them not only in their personal living but also in their personal wrestling with the powers of evil, giving them courage.... The cross of Jesus is thus the Christian symbol par excellence, forming the focal point of Christian spirituality, Christian praying, Christian believing, and Christian action. And the manifold ways in which it is and does all of this can trace their roots legitimately to the mind and intention, to the action and passion, of Jesus' himself.

N. T. Wright
The Meaning of Jesus

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE CROSS

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
April 16, 2000

Mark 8: 31-39 (NRSV)

O God, on this day of strong love, strong feeling, strong passions, when people responded spontaneously and joyfully and gladly, open us to your presence in our city and our world and our lives. And at the beginning of this holy week, silence in us any voice but your own, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

All week I could not get her out of my mind. The *Tribune* told about her on the front page in an article about Sarajevo and the remnants of the war that keep killing. Her name was Ema Alic. She was eleven years old and she and two friends died Monday when playing, they ventured out into a minefield on the outskirts of Sarajevo.

What I couldn't forget all week was this description from the Associated Press reporter: "For two hours, the girl was showing signs of life, waved with her little hand and called for help. Then she went quiet." (4/12/00) As I turned my mind to the preparation of a Palm Sunday sermon, I couldn't get her out of my thoughts and I realized that whatever the preacher tries to say on this day, in this week, must, in some way, take into account Ema Alic; must in some way acknowledge the harshest realities of the world in which we live. For that is what this day is about. On this day Jesus came to the city. On this day Jesus confronted human life at its most real, its most cynical, its most cruel, its most urban.

In his recent book, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills, The World Before and After Jesus,* Thomas Cahill—who wrote the best selling, *Gifts of the Jews* and *How the Irish Saved Civilization,* turns his attention to Jesus and the origins of Christianity. At the end of the book he tries his hand at the meaning of the passion, the crucifixion of Jesus. He notes that "in every age since Jesus's, the human race has done its best, as did the first Christians, not to look on him whom we have pierced."

Naturally, Cahill observes, we prefer the resurrection to the crucifixion. We like Easter better than Good Friday. Westerners prefer happy endings. "Our most common reference to the horror of the crucifixion is the sanitized cross," he says, ". . . and we seem determined to keep our eyes off the (one) who hung there."

But then Cahill makes an observation familiar to anyone who lives with or attempts to deal with the reality of human suffering and grief—". . . the poor and miserable know better." The oppressed, the sick and dying, the helpless, the frightened—know instinctively, it seems, the power—and the importance—of the cross.

In a strange way, Jewish thinkers and artists, who do not agree with us on his identity seem, particularly, to understand his suffering. Marc Chagall has painted it powerfully.

At the center of his strong painting about a pogrom, entitled "The White Crucifixion," there is a rabbi on a cross.

Asher Lev, the observant Jew of Chaim Potok's novels "finds himself in the Duomo in Florence, eyes riveted on Michelangelo's final pieta:

"I stared at the geometry of the stone and felt the stone luminous with strange suffering and power. I was an observant Jew, yet that block of stone moved me like a cry, like the call of seagulls over morning surf, like the echoing blasts of the shofar sounded by the Rebbe. I do not mean to blaspheme—I do not know how a devout Christian reacts to the Pieta. I was only able to relate it to elements in my own lived past. I stared at it. I walked slowly around it. I do not know how long I was there that first time. When I came back out into the brightness of that crowded square, I was astonished to discover that my eyes were wet." (Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills, The World Before and After Jesus,* p. 301-303)

The cross is where the story leads. A little girl dies in a Bosnian minefield. Six million Jews are murdered. Little Kayla Rolland is shot and killed by her six-year-old classmate. A good man dies on a cross outside the capital city, caught, it appears, in swirling political, economic and religious currents that reduce him to an expendable rabble-rouser, a trouble-maker. The cross is where it leads.

It would have been so easy not to go to Jerusalem. The first to attempt to write about his life introduces Jesus as a teacher and wonder worker attracting enormous crowds of people in Galilee, a rural fishing and farming district, nestled around the largest body of fresh water in the area, the lake or Sea of Galilee. It is far from Jerusalem and in the Galilean villages with their small synagogues, Jesus of Nazareth travels and teaches and heals, and people respond, crowding in on him everywhere he goes. There are deeper dynamics—he is transforming outsiders in his society, those who are rejected by polite, civil, religiously orthodox, into his own cadre of insiders. The insiders, religious officials, are becoming outsiders. There is a conflict brewing and exactly half way through the story Mark describes a pivotal incident.

Jesus, pretty much out of the blue, predicts that he's going to suffer, be rejected by the Jerusalem religious authorities, and be killed. His friends must have been stunned. There had been a few testy confrontations with local religious authorities—but no mention of suffering and death. He must have been in the sun too long. And who said anything about Jerusalem?

So Peter, interceding to protect Jesus from making a fool of himself, takes him aside and says something like, "Come on, Jesus, let's not be melodramatic. Nothing like that is going to happen to you." What happened next is perhaps the most disturbing incident in the record. Jesus looks at them all—looks at them with an unfamiliar ferocity, his eyes burn into them and focus on the one who has been so protective, so condescending, so patronizing. "Get behind me Satan!" Satan? Prince of Darkness—the very personification of evil, the ultimate enemy of and threat to life. Satan?

Is it more Hebrew hyperbole? Peter isn't Satan. He's Jesus' best friend.

I take it to mean that Peter, his friend, had just played into Jesus' most sensitive vulnerability. He didn't have to go to Jerusalem. He must have struggled with it. In part of his soul he did not want to go, dreaded going, dreaded the thought of what could happen to him if he did go. He could have continued the life of an itinerate rabbi, living pleasantly in Capernaum, making a living with his hands at carpentry, enjoying Peter's and John's catch of the day, when the spirit moved and time allowed teaching a little, healing the sick, maybe marrying, settling down, having a family, attending synagogue with his sons.

Jesus' strong reaction to Peter's imminently sensible suggestion is, I think, indication that staying in Galilee, not going to Jerusalem, not risking confrontation with people of real power, not risking arrest and death, was a real possibility, a very real temptation. People did not like Martin Scorcesi's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ,* precisely because it suggested, rightly I think, that Jesus was tempted not to go, to live a safe and quiet and normal life in Galilee.

But he will not settle for that, because in his heart, in his very soul, is the truest truth in the world, the very truth of God—"those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it."

Three times Jesus predicts the disaster ahead and tries to warn his friends. Three times they will hear none of it. And then they go to Jerusalem, at Passover, among the perhaps one million religious pilgrims who will converge on the city and slowly but surely and then quickly, what he predicted began to happen.

But first, some of the pilgrims on their way into the city from the north recognized him and recognized instantly the gesture he was making. In Galilee he had repeatedly instructed his friends not to talk about what they had seen him doing. But now, he had gone out of his way seemingly to enact one of his peoples' most precious hopes—that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem on a donkey. Never before had he ridden anywhere. Now he chooses to enter the city as the prophet Zechariah had predicted, "Lo your king comes to you, humble and lowly, riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass."

And so they ripped branches from the trees and laid their coats in his path and they sang and shouted, "Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," and their public demonstration and his complicity with it starts in motion the forces which will take exactly five days to eliminate him and restore order.

Somehow he means for this to happen. He means to make his statement, to be who he must be. And his act, his courage, his integrity, forces his friends and opponents and, before it is over, people who don't even know him, to take their stand: to stand with him or against him; to be faithful to him and to the new humanity he has created in their hearts and souls, or to stand with another crowd that shouts, "crucify him."

Cahill and others suggest that we don't ordinarily want to think about where this day leads. Peter Gomes says he was brought up in the "'let's have a parade' theory of Palm Sunday, that discreet form of Protestantism that could not bear the embarrassment or

indignity of the cross." We resolve the irony of Palm Sunday, Gomes says, "by removing the passion from the palms, and thereby leave today free for triumphalism and an Easter dress rehearsal." (Peter Gomes, *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living,* p.69)

The end of the story has always been troubling. We do like happy endings. We want our religion to be inspiring and uplifting and positive and what is there inspiring, uplifting, positive about a public execution? William Willimon tells about a church that placed a large, rough wooden cross outside during Lent and the neighbors complained because it was so ugly. And just this week I was walking past the blue ribbon trees outside which eloquently remind us of the ugly reality of child abuse and a woman, reading the sign and looking at the trees recognized me and said, "Why do you do this every year? It's so unpleasant."

In a Newsweek cover article, "The Other Jesus," (3/27/00) the views of Jesus from other world religions were explained. Islam regards him as a great prophet, but his crucifixion is an insult to Allah. A Buddhist monk said "the figure of the crucified Christ is very painful to me." The magazine concluded that the cross is what is unique about Christianity among the world religions, a fact St. Paul understood when he said the cross is foolishness by the world's standards, a stumbling block. It's the central Christian idea—that Jesus Christ lives human life to its fullest, experiences human life at its most joyful and passionate, but also its most vulnerable and painful, experiences even the enigma of human mortality, experiences even human tragedy and death. It is the central Christian idea that Jesus does this with full intentionality, decides to go to Jerusalem, to take the risks, to suffer the implications and the results of being himself fully, not only in the relative safety of Galilee, but in the city, the capital, the heart of his nation, and in the Temple.

And it is the central Christian idea that this is not just a well meaning teacher from Galilee getting caught in a web of political intrigue, this is God, acting in human history, God come dramatically among us in the life of this one—that what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem on a Friday afternoon is not only the story of human tragedy and suffering, it is also the story of God's love.

It's a world in which an eleven year old Croatian girl dies in a minefield, a world in which people we love get sick and die too soon, a world in which innocent children suffer and the good does not always come out on top, a world with enough tragedy and loss and grief to go around, a world in which the Son of God is crucified.

And those of us who are foolish enough to stand up in pulpits or brave enough to come to church this week, can only confess—as Peter Gomes so eloquently put it, that "God's love is the only reality. That God's love is the only thing that makes sense out of suffering, conflict and tragedy. God's love does not do away with conflict or suffering or tragedy; the cross should teach us that God's love does not do away with it, God's love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it, to pass through it." (Ibid.)

In the middle of a busy day last week, in fact the day I began by reading about Ema Alic, I received a phone call from a three-year-old grandson. He and his mother had been talking

about Sunday School and Jesus and suddenly he asked, "Who's God?" His mother took a pass at it and then said, "Let's call granddaddy," which they did. And fortunate for me he was, by that time, on to other matters and the basic theological question had receded temporarily.

But it will be back and my hope is that he and you and all of us will be strong enough and honest enough and vulnerable enough to see and to know that the clearest picture of God the human race has is not in a theological or philosophical text, nor the words of a creed, sermon, or essay. The clearest picture the human race has of God is that man on the cross, and the clearest idea of what God is like is the courage and will and love that brought Jesus from Galilee to the city and to his cross.

And that when our moment of radical vulnerability happens, we will remember—that love—that passion—that dying for us.

And I hope that, in time, he and you and all of us will know the truth that the cross is not only a symbol of God's love but also an invitation to life, that for you and me—to live as he did, with commitment and courage, to go to our Jerusalem, to risk, to give what we have, to love and care deeply, to be open to suffering and vulnerable, is to be as alive as God wills us to be, is to be free and whole and safe, in the love of the one who said, "those who lose their life will save it," and who, then with courage and commitment and a heart full of love—did just that.

Cahill, Gomes and others are right. We do not wish to see it end this way. But if we follow all the way to the end, we will be silent, and the artists, the musicians, the poets, will speak for us.

> Here might I stay and sing
> No story so divine
> Never was love, dear King,
> Never was grief like thine.
> This is my friend, In whose sweet praise,
> I all my days could gladly spend. ("My Song is Love Unknown," Samuel Crossan, 1664)

Amen.

Prayers of the People
April 16, 2000
The Reverend Carol J. Allen

For the arc of the sky over us this morning. For the mists far above the skyscraper peaks all around us. For the miracle of light and sound and green and mystery always changing. For the children and the choir, the preacher and those seated beside us, for all that you have ordained to replenish the earth and the people in their courses, all praise and glory be to you, Redeemer King. (inspired by Carl Sandberg).

Our God, before your suffering and death on the cross, we have come to sing hymns of praise. To you, who on this day is highly exalted, we come to adorn this sanctuary with what human minds and hands and bodies can invent. The writer, the singer, the actor, the painter, the dancer, the musician, the sculptor, the architect are given gifts by which to share in your creating work. To speak of our world and the human condition through art is also to speak of you, Creator God. Through these media, parts of your sacred story are told with deep reverence (inspired by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton). We thank you for this holy blessing.

As we hear again the ancient story of your triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we are confronted not with our impending suffering but with your's, Lord God. The spotlight is on you, on your beloved one, Jesus, who goes to the city to live out the fullness of his faith, to complete the promise of his baptism. As we look at him, we are stopped in our tracks. Where is the good news for us when the 'bottom falls out' for Jesus; when he has 'crashed through all his safety nets?' For we put our hopes in human power, in human intellect, in human talents to make ourselves healthy and wealthy and wise. When weaknesses overcome us, when fear of losing rules us, when our knees tremble, and failure is our lot, we wonder who it is we're loving, God. We remember how Jesus waited tables and washed feet. He turned the values of the world upside down. This is who we say we follow, but we wonder if we can pay the cost.

You did not desert Jesus; do not desert us, Holy God, in our times of trial. Your wisdom is not our wisdom. Help us to offer up in hope to your healing, all the times and places where we and your people around the world ail and ache, strive and fail. Take from us all cravings save a craving for your presence with us (inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor). Be our "integrity in the midst of lies and all the deceitful practices that abound. Help us speak your truth unflinchingly in public places. Give us courage to call to accountability all who claim to keep your word but violate trust." Keep us from going after false gods who promise cheap grace or empty actions. In all our daily dealings, may we see your costly grace at work. Deliver us from all lust for the power that oppresses and kills others (Miriam Therese Winter), and keep us, despite our doubts and bad behaviors unto eternal life. We pray in the name of the one who taught his disciples to say together when they pray, "OUR FATHER, ...Amen.